

About TOWN

FREE

The Community Guide to Rhinebeck, Red Hook & Tivoli
Annandale, Barrytown, Clermont, Clinton, Germantown, Livingston, Milan, Rhinecliff & surrounding areas

Chefs and Farmers: Spreading the Word On Healthy Eating

by Laura Pensiero

Results of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey for 1999 and 2000 indicate that a shocking two-thirds (64.5%) of the United States adult population is classified as overweight, and almost one-third is obese. The time has come for an all out war on this national “epidemic.” Now more than ever, health professionals must reach out to chefs and farmers to educate consumers on how to use fresh seasonal ingredients that are at their nutrient and flavor peak. The job titles chef and farmer bring to mind abundance, flavor, and wholesome, while the associations that go with “dietitian” are quite different. With a little guidance from health professionals, chefs and farmers can also be active forces in nutrition education through farm markets and tours, lectures and cooking demonstrations. Here in the Hudson Valley we are lucky to have at our fingertips all the resources necessary to make this approach work.

Besides being co-owner of Gigi Trattoria in Rhinebeck, I am a registered dietitian and culinary consultant. I try to help people make healthy, real and lasting changes in the way they eat. Over the last twelve years, a few core truths have become my guiding compass. First, telling people what to eat is rarely effective; showing them is. This discovery led me to culinary school and eventually to educate people about nutrition through cooking and cookbook writing; second, I realized that that the nutritional message must be largely, if not completely, positive (words such as “limit” and “avoid” should be used with extreme discretion); third, I discovered that chefs and farmers who collaborate with health professionals are among the most effective nutrition educators.

In 1998, I put together a celebrity roster of chefs for *The Strang Cookbook for Cancer Prevention* (Dutton, 1998; a second, paperback edition will be published by McGraw Hill in 2004). Keeping in mind that most chefs like to keep dining simple and “clean” during those rare moments outside of restaurants, I specifically solicited the chefs’ dinner favorites for their private Sunday or Monday evening meal at home. I also appealed to their enormous creative talents by providing them with lengthy lists of ingredients to use—a mystery basket to tempt their culinary curiosity. In the end I was able to entice forty culinary superstars to submit “healthy recipes.” Among these were PBS Cooking Series Host Jacques Pépin, who wrote the foreword and provided a couple of recipes, including Turkey Steaks with Grape and Currant Sauce; and Lidia Bastianich, of Felidia in New York City, who provided Seared Sea Scallop and Lima Bean Salad.

The chefs gave me license to modify their recipes to make them healthier (a great act of trust that was rarely necessary) and to make them easier to execute for the home cook (which was necessary). My co-authors, Michael Osborne, MD, president of Strang Cancer Prevention Center, and Susan Oliveria, ScD, an epidemiologist specializing in nutrition and cancer prevention, provided the solid scientific framework for the book. This type of collaborative relationship among renowned chefs, scientists and health professionals creates a bridge of knowledge that facilitates healthy eating and healthy living.

The Farmers’ Role

New relationships are also forming between Hudson Valley farmers and their customers. Some farmers offer tours and many provide the option to pick-your-own. This trend can play an enormous role in changing eating behavior. It is not difficult to imagine the increased likelihood that a child will try a pepper picked by his or her own hand rather than one from an unknown source; the latter is more likely to be picked out of a dish or off of a pizza. At farmers’ markets, vegetable stands, and local restaurants, consumers are rediscovering (or discovering) freshly harvested tomatoes,

butternut squash, and sweet corn. And it works for everyone: consumers buying directly from farmers get healthy, great tasting ingredients, and it helps farmers stay in business.

Farmers and chefs can offer information to consumers on the techniques of handling fresh ingredients. For instance, the techniques used in peeling and seeding a butternut squash apply to almost all of the other harvest squash. What’s more, the seasonings and cooking methods that enhance the natural sweetness of this vegetable spill over to its other family members. By understanding some basic characteristics about butternut squash, you have numerous other “seasonal” preparations at your fingertips—and you’ll know exactly what to do when the market only has pumpkin or Hubbard squash. People need a framework to help create their own adaptations. An understanding of the ingredients—where they come from, when they’re available, and what to do with them—gives people the freedom to be more adventurous and confident in the kitchen and in restaurant dining rooms. It can also be a pivotal part of increasing the quantity and variety of protective plant foods in the diet. The nutrients and phytochemicals in plant foods—natural plant compounds with disease-fighting properties—not only play an important role in preventing disease, but when added to the diet they displace higher calorie, nutrient-empty foods that contribute to obesity. The idea here is not to focus on cutting out the “bad” food, but to add those tasty seasonal good foods to the menu.

Health and Fine Dining

The link between healthy offerings and restaurant fare need not be overt, nor is it only available in “health food” establishments. One only needs to travel to Mina’s in Red Hook, Milagros in Tivoli, or 40 West, The Beekman Arms and even the classic French Petit Bistro in Rhinebeck, to find menus that include items that go light on fat and heavy on

the use locally grown fruits and vegetables. At Gigi Trattoria, which I co-own with the talented Chef Gianni Scappin, we do not promote the fact that more than half of our menu items could get the little heart symbol for healthy. When we opened in 2001, we coined the phrase “Hudson Valley Mediterranean” to describe our menu. This not only gave us license to cross borders from Italy into France, Spain and other parts of the Mediterranean, but it also describes the integration of locally grown produce into traditional Mediterranean dishes, which happen to be innately healthy.

Having moved to the area to open the restaurant, it was initially challenging for us to source out the best products and build associations with local growers and food producers. Over the last year, we have established relationships that have allowed us to solidify our Hudson Valley Mediterranean mantra. More recently, we have added a vegetarian offering to our daily regional Italian Specials. Items such as Roasted Acorn Squash filled with Walnut Polenta and Braised Lentils and Portobello “Piccata” with Lemon Capers and Baby Arugula Salad have made recent appearances.

People attempting to walk the tight rope between enjoying eating and doing something that is right for their body tend to respond to positive “healthy eating” messages. The farmer and the chef can help bring it all home, providing a connection to the food, an understanding of how to work with ingredients, and, most importantly, the very real truth that eating healthy and eating well are one in the same concept. Health advocates must embrace this notion and reach out to chefs and farmers within their local communities bringing them in as part a team that teaches people to eat healthily and happily. ■

Laura Pensiero, RD, is co-owner of Gigi Trattoria in Rhinebeck, and a nutrition consultant for Memorial Sloan-Kettering, Strang Cancer Prevention, and St. Francis Hospital and Health Center

Recipe: Spinach Cake

Gâteau d’Épinard

Antoine Bouterin, Chef/Owner, Bouterin, New York
4 to 6 Servings

Antoine provides us with a quick and delicious new option for spinach, one of nature’s nutrient powerhouses. Serve on its own or with roasted or grilled chicken or lean pork. Top with chopped fresh tomatoes before serving.

- 2 tbsp corn or peanut oil
- 2 lbs fresh spinach, well washed and tough stems removed to yield 1 to 1 1/2 lbs
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed and peeled
- 2 tbsp minced fresh parsley
- 1 tbsp minced shallots
- pinch grated lemon zest
- pinch freshly grated nutmeg
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup milk
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tsp butter, softened

Lightly oil a 10-inch round cake pan. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

Cut the spinach leaves into chiffonade (long thin ribbons). In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil until very hot but not smoking. Add the spinach leaves, garlic, parsley, shallots, lemon zest, nutmeg, and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring often, until the spinach has wilted, 1 to 2 minutes. Sprinkle the flour over the spinach and mix well; there should be no lumps.

In a small bowl, whisk together the eggs and the milk. Add the mixture to the saucepan with the spinach, and stir to combine. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the butter. Pour into the prepared pan and press down to an even layer using a wood spoon or rubber spatula. Bake until firm and lightly browned, 12 to 15 minutes.

- Spinach is an excellent source of vitamins A and C; this recipe provides, 157% and 61% of these nutrients, respectively.
- Spinach is also a good source of calcium; 1 serving adds 15% of the daily value.
- An excellent source of fiber.

Per serving (based on 4 servings):

Calories: 104

Protein: 8 gm

Carbohydrates: 3 gm

Fat: 7 gm

Cholesterol: 111 mg

Dietary fiber: 8 gm

Saturated fat: 2 Gm

Percentages of Calories: 57% fat, 31% protein, 12% carbohydrate

Major Sources of Potential Cancer Fighters

Phytochemicals: plant polyphenols (flavonoids, phenolic acids), terpenes (carotenoids, monoterpenes)